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## Thirteen Ways of Looking at Poetry Writing (Minus Twelve): Using Bad Poetry to Make Good Poetry Accessible

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*I wanted students to loosen up and play with words, and what could be more playful than purposely aiming to create language disasters?*

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I'll admit it: I'm about as much a poet as I am a bucking bronco rider. Sure, I can analyze it. I can read Robert Browning and think, "Wow, was that good! I love this stuff!" I can scan for rhyme schemes, distinguish an Italian from a Shakespearean sonnet by ear, and wax rhapsodic about powerful images and metaphors. I have no idea what "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" means, but I love how hard I think when I read it. I count Seamus Heaney, Mary Oliver, and Pablo Neruda as friends on the poetry page. I attend poetry readings and try to arrange to be in my car at noon when Garrison Keillor reads the poem of the day on NPR.

But write poetry? Um, no. That would be what my Masters of Fine Arts friends did, not me. I have spent a large percentage of my life being a poetry aficionado, loving the playfulness of poetry but content to stay on the sidelines rather than be part of the action. I never wrote angst-filled rants against societal hypocrisy or gushed about rainbows and love. When I was required to write a poem in school, I did it grudgingly and mechanically, hoping that strong vocabulary choices would hide the fact that the muse just plain didn't speak to me. Poetry is so emotionally raw and beautiful, and I didn't want to put my emotions out there in the world for others to read.

In staying on the poetry writing sidelines, though, I unintentionally passed on to my students an impression that poetry is something muses inspire a chosen few to create while the rest of us pull it apart to try to figure it out. I was creating a distance that reinforced my students' belief that poetry isn't for real people. If you're going to be an English major, you might "get" poetry—maybe. If you're going to do anything else in life, poetry doesn't matter.

This article presents my effort to move students past their belief that poetry is inaccessible by requiring them to write bad poetry. My original goal was to bring back the fun of poetry by letting students play with words and sounds rather than obsessing over rhyme schemes. I wanted my students to see that they knew more about poetry than they thought they did, that poetry and language play are a natural part of how we think. As students created bad poetry and discussed what they believed poetry was (and wasn't), we discovered together that much of our fear of poetry comes from a narrow definition that confines it to pre-set patterns. When we broadened our conception of poetry to say that poetry is the result of playing with words and sounds for rhetorical effect, regardless of the quality of the final assignment, we learned that reading and writing poetry really is for everyone.

The bad poetry assignment began the year I was assigned to teach a high school creative writing class. Uh oh. In my previous language arts classes I'd been able to weave poetry instruction into the broader curriculum, focusing on analysis of meaning rather than the actual

writing of poetry. If there was a required creative writing component in the curriculum, I would focus on my preferred genre of creative nonfiction. Faced with one full semester of 85-minute class periods every other day, I tried to figure out a way to teach creative writing without teaching poetry. No luck. I couldn't just ignore a genre because I didn't like writing it. I had a number of students who signed up for the class because they wanted to write poetry. I couldn't sidestep it this time. I started asking myself some tough questions: How could I love reading poetry and encourage my students to love it if I was afraid to write it? Could I really pull my students into the world of poetry if I stayed a spectator myself? What kind of assignment could I create that would allow us to learn together, confronting the fear while also learning to play with language?

Scott Peterson (2002) observes:

Most of us are intimidated by poetry, frightened by its forms and rhyme schemes. We feel that the rules are locked behind closed doors, and only those select few who have the keys can play the poetry game. Not true. Anyone who loves to mess around with words can write poetry. (p. 203)

Note the terms of play: "poetry game," "mess around with words." Poetry is about being playful with language. I thought back to what I most loved about reading poetry and realized that it was the playfulness. I liked the sounds, the invented words, the rhythms that begged to be read aloud. I also thought about my own resistance to writing poetry as a high school student and realized that much of my resistance was due to a belief that poetry has to be emotionally raw and that poets earnestly pin their hearts on their sleeves for the world to critique. What if I took away the earnestness and just played with the concept of poetry?

And so began my bad poetry assignment. The whole point of it was to write the worst poem possible, to really try to fall flat on your face. I wasn't harboring any illusions; I didn't intend this assignment to awaken students to their poetic calling. I just wanted to get past the fear, both for my students and for myself, and move on to the fun. Organized poetry playtime. I began with a whole class discussion about what makes a poem, well, a poem. Students dutifully responded with criteria like rhyme scheme, rhythm, similes, and the rest of their literary vocabulary learned from other classes. The students who typically tuned out during academic discussions began to doodle in their notebook margins.

"So what would make a poem really bad? I mean really, really awful?" I got some surprised looks, then a few mumbles about Hallmark greeting cards. I then gave students a list of bad poetry poetics, borrowed from one of my undergraduate English professors who had declared himself the king of bad poetry. Bad poems need to be about the most general topics possible (love, death, depression, life), force form beyond its bounds, and work as hard as possible to be pointless. The goal of bad poetry is not parody but rather to write something that claims to be a poem and yet really isn't. I shared a few examples of bad poetry and then told the class that we would be having a bad poetry reading the following class period. Student responses were mixed:

"You mean we're supposed to write bad poetry on purpose?"

"What if we accidentally write good poetry while we're trying to write bad poetry?"

"Dude! This is an assignment I can actually do!"

"Wait a minute—why are we doing this? Aren't we supposed to be learning how to write good poetry in this class?"

Exactly. By writing bad poetry first, I was hoping to help students over the “Poetry is over my head and I can’t read, write, or appreciate it” hurdle. I wanted students to loosen up and play with words, and what could be more playful than purposely aiming to create language disasters? It’s sort of like finger painting with words. If a good piece of poetry accidentally slipped in, that wouldn’t be such a bad thing. We were aiming later on to produce more polished poems; this assignment’s goal was to teach students—and me—to play and see what might happen.

I arranged with the above-mentioned king of bad poetry to come be our judge. This arrangement added an extra incentive for students to complete the assignment, and I knew that this professor would add critiques which were as playful as the poems which would be shared. The night before our poetry reading, I sat down during a quiet moment at a student congress tournament to compose my masterpiece: a bad beat poem. A sizeable amount of sleep deprivation substituted for my poetic muse, resulting in a poem that put me and a fellow speech coach into a fit of giggles that got us booted out of the judges’ room:

Exhaustion is life.  
 Zombie, zombie look at me.  
 If I fall asleep I will crash into a tree and die.  
 Yeah, dig it.  
 Exhaustion is pain.  
 Band-aids, skinned knees, blisters on my heels  
 Make pain in my life  
 Which causes exhaustion.  
 Exhaustion. Yeah, dig it.

Bad poetry reading day arrived. Students went beyond my expectations, contributing limericks without rhythm, odes to wooden spoons and worn-out shoes, and poems whose rhyme schemes were—ahem—rather amorphous. I dressed in black that day and wore a black beret as I read my bad beat poem. My students had no idea what a beat poem was, but they knew whatever I was reading was bad—and silly, which was the point. One particularly zealous student wrote a title that was so long that by the time he finished reading it, his classmates started applauding, thinking that he had read his entire poem. As students continued to file up to the front of the room to read, I watched one boy, who suddenly realized that everyone really was reading, yank a piece of notebook paper out of his binder and scribble a few lines. When our university professor judge chose the winner and runners-up, this last-minute offering took second place (the ode to wooden spoons took the grand prize). The student, who had up until this point in the semester refused to write, took advantage of a non-threatening writing scenario and received immediate reinforcement for his participation.

Of course we didn’t continue to write bad poems the rest of the semester—or at least not on purpose. Our bad poetry reading led to discussion of why poems were judged as good or not. We talked about reader preferences, subject matter, whether or not a poem had to rhyme and why poets would choose various forms, words, and images. We did quick image writes, composed found poems, experimented with rhyme schemes and blank verse, and read lots of poems while we were learning to write them. But most of all, we played with language, and that play began with being as over the top silly as possible.

Has my bad poetry assignment revolutionized my teaching? Do students joyfully rush into my classroom with sonnets and odes that they can't wait for me to read? Have I suddenly found my poetic vocation? No, no, and no. I still don't view myself as a skilled, or even a very competent, poet. Perhaps a few of my students have decided that poetry runs deep inside them and have moved on to writing careers. More important for me is that for this activity, my students and I felt empowered to write, and together we experienced the pleasure of playing with words and sounds. For at least one lesson, poetry stepped off its pedestal and became approachable and friendly. The muse did not enter the classroom in a typical way, but she did come—at least briefly. I still would rather read poetry than write it. But actually sitting in the poet's chair more often has taught me that poetry is not meant to intimidate or frighten. Writing poetry, as well as reading it, can be a lot of fun.

### Reference

Peterson, S. (2002). Cat watching: Six easy steps to classroom poetry. In A. Bauman & A. Peterson (Eds.), *Breakthroughs: Classroom discoveries about teaching writing* (pp. 201-207). Berkeley, CA: National Writing Project.

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